The Fourth Church Pulpit

SANCTITY FROM NINE TO FIVE

November 7, 1993

John M. Buchanan

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

126 East Chestnut St. Chicago, IL 60611-2094
Phone: 312.787.4570
John M. Buchanan, Pastor

Scripture: Genesis 2:4b-9, 15, 1 Corinthians 15:50-58

". . . prosper for us the work of our hands . . ."
Psalm 90:17 (NRSV)

I never read that passage without wondering about it . . . Paul's magnificent soliloquy on the mystery and meaning of the resurrection, the Christian Gospel in all its power and beauty which has given comfort and solace and courage to so many people at life's darkest hour.

> "Where, O death, is your victory?
> Where, O death, is your sting?
> . . . thanks be to God who gives us
> the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." [I Cor. 15:58

And then, suddenly, almost abruptly:

> "Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable,
> in the Lord your labor is not in vain." [I Cor. 15:58]

Where did that come from? From resurrection to work? Who said anything about work?

And yet — is there a subject that concerns us more? Death may be a bigger puzzle, but we probably spend more time worrying about our jobs. The search for a job, the right job, the job that offers hope for advancement and an attractive career path, the job that meets my abilities, a job that reflects God's will for my life, the search — these days — for any job is itself a major project. And getting a job is not the end of the issue. We are making job changes at an increasing rate, and career changes — the norm is now several major changes in one's work career. And job security: "Is my job safe? Will my job be eliminated? Can I be sure I'll have a job in the future?" And, of course, the biggest job issue of all — "What am I going to do when I no longer have one, a job, when my work is done and I have a lot of time on my hands?"

In the 15th chapter of the First Letter to the Corinthians Paul goes from resurrection to work, from the sublime mystery of our faith to the most mundane of all topics, without missing a beat, and the reason is that it is one of two or three major issues for every one of us. And, we are learning it is an issue with deeply psychological as well as spiritual dimensions. So the Judeo/Christian tradition takes work very seriously.

In the beginning God is described not as a sublimely idle deity, but a worker . . . making things.

And then the early tradition turns to human work. Adam and Eve are placed in a garden. Their job is to till it and keep it — to work in it. Most of the art shows Adam and Eve with their fig leaves looking alternately at each other and the forbidden fruit. It ought to show them at work, pruning, weeding, planting, building. The wonderful garden will provide for their needs — one of which is, apparently, the need to do something productive — to work. Paradise is, at least in part, having meaningful work to do.

The theme recurs interestingly, often in conjunction with profound treatments of life and death. Psalm 90 which we read together this morning is one of the most beautiful and poignant —

> "O Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations."

It faces ultimate issues squarely, courageously.

> "The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; . . . they are soon gone, and we fly away."

And then at the end:

> "O prosper the work of our hands!"

As if to say that among the ultimate issues for all of us — of equal significance and seriousness with life and death — is our work, our labor, the meaning and lasting purpose of our efforts.

"There is nothing better for a man or woman than that they should eat and drink and find enjoyment in their toil," the preacher in the Book of Ecclesiastes says. Indeed, is there anything happier than to enjoy your work, to be paid to do something you love and care about so much that you'd do it for nothing — which is how Michael Jordan once described his feelings about professional basketball, although that was before last night. . . !

From beginning to end the Bible gives serious attention to work and our attitude toward work.

Now you might conclude that it's easy to romanticize work if you don't have to do it — that the hard reality of work is that some of it is so difficult and unpleasant that the best one can do is complete it as soon as possible, be done with it and get on to other things . . . leisure activities, play time.

In fact, parallel to the Biblical tradition of work as a part of God's plan, another view emerged early in Western culture that concluded that work was to be avoided if at all possible.

This view concluded that work was God's punishment for the sins of Adam and Eve. By the early Middle Ages the ideal was not meaningful, productive work — but leisure, idleness. Men and women of means didn't work at all. In fact the early church reinforced this view by teaching that because work was punishment, leisure must be the reward for righteousness. Therefore, the nobility, people of wealth, were obviously favored by God and superior to everyone else. The hard labor needed to sustain life was done by slaves or serfs.

In the year 540 a monk by the name of Benedict wrote a constitution for his monastery at Monte Cassino. The Rule of St. Benedict had an enormous impact on how the West came to regard work by doing away with all slaves and servants in the monastery and by insisting that part of the holy life, the sanctified life, was work. The monastery would be self-sufficient. Each monk had work to do — even very wisely, the old and sick.

One historian concludes:

> "In an age that considered manual labor demeaning and idealized the life of leisure Benedict made a profound contribution to the meaning of work."

Furthermore, Benedict reasoned, work is not merely a private enterprise to enable me to get ahead or to provide for me and mine alone. The purpose of work is related to the community, the community's welfare and security.

> "The purpose of work in the monastic ideal," writes Sister Joan Chittister, a contemporary monastic, prioress of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, in Erie, Pennsylvania, "is not to get ahead, but to enable one to get more human and to make my world more just."
> [See *Weavings,* January/February, 1993, *Work: Participation in Creation.*]

So "prosper, O Lord, my work," means help me, through what I do, to become more human and to help make your world better.

We Americans have a mixed relationship with work. On the one hand, Sister Chittister observes,

> "It is one thing our culture has done best. Children get jobs at an early age. We have been trained to be responsible and productive. The Western world fast became the industrial center — where a few people could out-farm, out-produce, and out-organize every other area of the world."

We have been and are enormously productive, but our brutal competitiveness produces brutal results in human, if not economic terms sometimes. Our very productive market system has not resolved the gap between rich and poor which, in fact, is widening at a rate that concerns everybody.

We can out-produce and out-organize about everybody, but that drive for success seems sometimes to be a prescription for failure in life: destroying relationships, marriages, health itself.

And now, with shifting economic realities, a new challenge: "A Global Job Crisis" — a spiritual as well as an economic threat. The president of a manufacturing company in Ohio gave me my first subscription to the *Wall Street Journal* years ago with the kind but serious suggestion that if I was going to quote the *New York Times* to him in my sermons, he'd like some evidence that I at least knew about and occasionally read another point of view. So in addition to Chicago papers I like to know what's in the *Journal* and the *Times*. And what I read every day in the *Wall Street Journal* from my perspective — son of a railroader, born and raised in coal and steel country — is that these are not easy times for people who work with their hands and backs. And that work force reductions — reported every day in this country and abroad — may read like academic data, but for the people whose jobs disappear, and for whom there are very few alternatives, the result is an enormous human tragedy, which is spiritual as well as economic. How do you pray with confidence "O Lord, prosper the work of my hands" when there is no work to do?

The loss of a job, or the threat of the loss of what one could once assume was stable, a life-time arrangement perhaps, has become a major trauma for many Americans.

Sometimes it seems that the more efficient we are, the higher the price in human terms. Have you been to the gas station lately: pulled to the pump, inserted your card, pumped your gas, got your receipt? That transaction used to put you in contact with one — two — maybe three people who were working for wages. Now no one — except, ironically, sadly, the man who approaches and asks if he can clean your windshield while you wait. Automation is wonderful, but that man's former job is one of the prices we pay for efficiency.

George Kennan, distinguished diplomat and former Ambassador to the Soviet Union wonders:

> "Why a society that complains of unemployment should encourage and embrace every conceivable possibility of replacing human labor by mechanical devices? Why the robot in place of the human hand?" (Kennan knows, of course, that the robot won't make a mistake, get tired or ask for a raise.) "The aim," he says "in a healthy and well balanced society should be to find useful and, if possible, creative work for every mature human being." [*Around the Cragged Hill*, p. 101]

There is, I think, great wisdom in our faith tradition's focus on meaningful work as part of God's intent and provision, the dignity of work, and the spiritual dimension of work to add meaning and dignity to life.

We have learned the truth of the Biblical perspective, not only as we find ourselves anxious about our jobs, but as our society suffers enormously from the results of unemployment or underemployment. Everybody agrees that whatever else is wrong with a system that produces and maintains entire neighborhoods of second and third generation poverty and welfare system dependence, at the heart of the problem is the absence of accessible, viable work to do. It is an agenda we have not yet addressed.

We need a new theology of work. Our culture needs a thoughtful philosophy of work as we move into a brave new world of more automation, fewer manufacturing jobs, more leisure time. And I propose that we have one in our tradition. It begins with gratitude: for God's work . . .

> "Lord, you have made me glad by your work, at the work of your hands I sing for joy." The Psalmist wrote. [Psalm 92:4]

And gratitude for human work: thank God for work well done - for a row plowed and planted straight, a brick wall that is true, a garment well made, a meal beautifully prepared, a letter perfectly typed, an anthem gorgeously sung. Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche Communities which minister to physically and mentally handicapped adults, wrote:

> "There is something very beautiful in work which is well and precisely done. It is a participation in the activity of God, who makes all things well and wisely, beautiful to the last detail." [*Weavings*, op. cit.]

Sometimes recently it seems that all religion has to say about work is negative — warning about being obsessive about it, critiquing the demonic possibilities of our success-oriented culture.

And yet, I find I cannot stifle my gratitude that there are those for whom work is important enough to be all absorbing. I'm grateful for the obsession with doing it right, the disciplined attention to detail — on the part of a surgeon, or the airline pilot, or the architect who is designing the church, or the people who maintain the electrical and heating systems. I'm grateful for the hard work orientation of my predecessors — of my family before me, most of whom worked at hard jobs for long hours and little pay all their lives. I will always be grateful for the opportunity to learn that there is a right way to do even the most menial task, to dig a ditch, saw a board, hammer a nail, lift a load.

God is a creator. Jesus was a carpenter. St. Paul supported himself by making tents. If we think paradise is leisure, the absence of work, we've missed something essential in the story. Adam and Eve have a garden to till. Paradise is having meaningful work to do. So be grateful if you have meaningful work.

And if your work seems to be done, there is an intriguing Biblical suggestion that God has something more for you, something different perhaps, but something for you. Rethink that social/political euphemism that equates unemployment with laziness. Acknowledge what it says about the spiritual value of work when the Post Office announces 40 job openings and 5,000 people stand in the cold all day to apply for them.

Praise God for work well done. Reward those who are trying to work . . . the youngster who wants to shine your shoes or wash your windshield. They're aggressive entrepreneurs — a posture people go to graduate school to learn.

And two final thoughts —

One: the work place is a sacred place. Now, that is a bit of a stretch for most of us. This is sacred ground — here — church. The office, the plant, the factory, secular, maybe even profane space.

Our faith, however, urges us in the other direction. Doris Donnelly, a theologian at John Carroll University, wrote,

> "The pity is that we have been programmed to expect God to come to us in church settings only."

God has sanctified this world by sending Jesus Christ to live and work in it. "The world is charged with God's real presence and activity," is present.

Two: God has work for each of us to do. That belief is at the heart of our Presbyterian tradition: God does not call clergy alone to their work — but every man and woman. God needs plumbers and police, homemakers and nurses, engineers and store clerks. No job is more spiritual, more sacred than any other. How do you know if you are doing the work God has for you to do? It's the toughest question of all, and it is presumptuous for anyone but you to answer. If it is your question, there is a way to approach it. What are your gifts? What do you do well? What do you do that contributes to the community? What is it that fills you with exhilaration, challenges you, and on occasion at least provides satisfaction and even a little pride?

That, whatever it is, is your work! . . . I happened to see Madeleine L'Engle being interviewed on television recently. She is the successful author of novels, highly acclaimed children's books and a series of sensitive and intelligent books on religious topics. She was telling about her decision to be a writer. Like many other aspiring writers she worked hard, was highly disciplined, wrote a designated amount each day, submitted her work to publishers, magazines and journals — and for five years received nothing but rejection slips. She began to doubt herself, to wonder if she was a writer. Perhaps she was deluding herself. If there was anything of God's will in this enterprise, surely she would experience a little success. After a particularly painful rejection of a piece she was sure was good, she decided to quit — to help her husband, an actor, run the general store hey had bought, to keep her house and raise her children — and promptly became depressed. One evening in the midst of her tears, her grief and disappointment, she began involuntarily to start thinking about the plot of a new novel based on her experience of disappointment and failure. And in that instant she knew, she said, who she was and what her work was. She was "Madeleine L'Engle, writer. My work is writing, whether anybody ever reads it."

Your work — your sacred work — is whatever God has given you the gifts to do.

And furthermore, God needs your work to be done . . . however large or small. . . it is important to God.

Robert Coles' new book, *The Call To Service,* begins with the account of Tessie, one of the four six-year-old African American children who were assigned by a federal judge to begin the process of school integration in New Orleans. Coles has been thinking and writing about those children since 1961. How did they do it? What was the source of their courage and determination that sent them from the security of their homes every morning, accompanied by federal marshals, to walk through lines of white adults, screaming at them, threatening to kill them, sometimes spitting on them, in order to attend a school where nobody wanted them. . . .

Coles was a medical student, specializing in child psychiatry at the time, and was observing the children and their families. One time he asked Tessie directly how she could do it every morning and this is what she said:

> "My granny says there's God. He's looking too, and I should remember that it's a help to Him to do this. . . Granny says, 'Next it will be some other thing to do' because you always should be trying to help God out somehow."
> [R. Coles, *The Call to Service,* p. 7]

No matter who you are, God has something for you to do . . . a household to keep, a child to nurture, a company to run, a friend to encourage.

And when your work is done, when time and company policy converge and you no longer have a job, there is, I submit, more of God's good work to do.

> "What's the purpose? Why am I still here?" an elderly woman, confined to her bed, asked me, a not uncommon question. "What good am I doing anyone?"

All I could think to say, and in retrospect I believe it is the truth, was:

> "Why, if you weren't here, who would I have to visit this afternoon?"

She smiled.

In God's economy, there is always work for you to do. And there is the promise. . .

> "Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable . . . in the Lord your labor is not in vain."

+ + + + +

O God, bless the work of our hands. Help us to see the work you have for us to do. Give us patience. Give us courage. Give us strength. And give us the faith to trust your promise that what we do, contributes to your kingdom on earth. In Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.